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## THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

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### II. THE PRE-PROPHETIC PERIOD IN CANAAN

The conquest of Canaan brought many new elements into Israel's life. The change from nomadic to settled agricultural ways necessarily produced modifications of religious forms and conceptions; the cultivation of the grape instead of the date palm is but one of the differences which led to the new interpretation of an old rite. The Canaanites were subdued only in part; many remained in the land, to be gradually absorbed into the Hebrew nation. Accepting, as these gradually did, the worship of Yahweh, they continued to believe their old myths and to practice their old customs. Just as heathen myths and festivals have sometimes been introduced into Christianity by giving them Christian names, so Canaanite ideas and customs inevitably fused with those brought by Israel from the wilderness.

Perhaps the most striking way in which this fusion is exhibited is in the fact that the old shrines of the land were taken over and became shrines of Yahweh. At Shechem there was a high place to a god called Baal-berith (Judg. 9:4) or El-berith (Judg. 9:46). This became not only a shrine of Yahweh, but tradition in time attributed its origin to Abraham, the Hebrew (Gen. 12:6 ff.). Abraham had had a vision there by a sacred oak, it was said, and in this vision God had promised Canaan to his descendants. Bethel, another old Canaanite sanctuary, had been regarded as a divine abode because of the peculiar character of the stones there. At this point the limestone vertebrae of Palestine protrude through the soil and are worn by the weather into curious shapes; these led early men to believe that a god was manifesting himself there. The Israelites, taking over this sanctuary, explained the beginnings of its sanctity by the story of a dream that Jacob, their ancestor,

had had there. The sanctity of a neighboring hill was accounted for by the tradition that Abraham had built an altar there. Similarly Hebron, another old shrine, to which was attached a sacred cave similar to that discovered at Gezer,<sup>1</sup> became a shrine of Yahweh, where Abraham had had a divine visitation (Gen., chap. 18). Veneration for its sacred cave was afterward accounted for by the tradition that there the patriarchal dead were buried (Gen., chap. 23). The sanctity of the sacred wells of Beer-sheba tradition in time accounted for by saying that Abraham had dug one of them, or had planted a tamarisk tree there (Gen. 21:22-33).

Two instances of the transfer of Canaanite shrines to Yahweh are pretty clearly detailed in the Old Testament narratives. At the foot of Mount Hermon the Jordan pours forth from a subterranean spring as a full-grown river. This marvelous and sudden appearance of such quantities of life-giving water marked the place off as the abode of a god from the time men dwelt in its vicinity. In the midst of the period of the Judges the Hebrews conquered this place and at once, without delay or compunction, made it a sanctuary of Yahweh, installing a grandson of Moses as its chief priest (Judg., chaps. 17, 18).

Jerusalem also was not captured by the Hebrews at first, but was held by the Jebusites until the time of David (Judg. 1:21; 19:11-12; II Sam. 5:6-9). The sacred rock and cave which have played such a part in Hebrew, Christian, and Mohammedan ritual and tradition were, no doubt, a part of an earlier Jebusite shrine. The Jebusites, with that hospitable mingling of things sacred and secular characteristic of Semitic folk,<sup>2</sup> employed their sanctuary as their threshing-floor. This sanctuary David naturally took over, and the act was justified to Hebrew thought by the belief that Yahweh had stopped at that point the ravages of a plague (II Sam., chap. 24).

The taking-over of these sanctuaries involved the taking-over of much of their traditions and ritual. It meant that Yahweh had become the God of the land—its owner or proprietor—just as the Canaanite gods had been. The term *Baal* (i.e., owner, possessor)

<sup>1</sup> See Macalister, *Bible Side-Lights from the Mound of Gezer*, pp. 67 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 2 ed., p. 145.

had been freely applied to them; this term was now transferred to Yahweh, so that his worshipers called him *Baal*. Thus Gideon, an enthusiastic worshiper of Yahweh, bore the name Jerrub-baal; Saul named his son Ish-baal; David one of his, Meri-baal. As both monarchs were champions of the worship of Yahweh, it is clear that they intended the term *Baal* to refer to him. The prophet Hosea also definitely states that Yahweh had been called *Baal* (Hos. 2:16).

As the Baal of Palestine it came in time to be believed that Yahweh was connected with the soil of the land and could be rightly worshiped only upon it. This is the thought which underlies the request of Naaman to take two mule-loads of earth from Palestine to Damascus, that he might be able to worship Yahweh there (II Kings 5:17), a request which Elisha, the leader of the Yahweh worship of his day, granted.

As God of the land Yahweh became the God of agricultural law; he was especially interested in its enforcement. As a natural result of the conquest of Canaan and the transfer of the land and its shrines to Yahweh, the author of the E document in the eighth century regards the body of agricultural laws in Exod., chaps. 21-23, as a fundamental part of the covenant of Yahweh with Israel. These laws had doubtless been a slow growth; they were the outcome of a long agricultural experience. Many of their provisions are strikingly similar to those of the Code of Hammurabi, which had been promulgated in Babylon before 1900 B.C. For centuries before the conquest of Palestine by Thothmes III of Egypt in 1478 B.C., Babylonian influence had been dominant in Canaan and communication with Babylonia very frequent. At times the country may have been controlled by Babylonian kings. It is possible that some of the laws of the Book of the Covenant had been shaped by those of Babylon,<sup>3</sup> but Babylonian influence had not been controlling, as the many points in which the Book of the Covenant diverges from the Code of Hammurabi prove.

As a part of the transfer of emphasis in the religion of Yahweh to an agricultural basis the great festivals were transformed. To the simple Passover feast, which commemorated the yeanning time

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kittel, *Scientific Study of the Old Testament*, pp. 28-30.

of domestic animals, an agricultural offering of first-fruits in the form of unleavened bread was added. This occurred because the first ripe grain was gathered at the very season in which the old nomadic feast fell.<sup>4</sup> Seven weeks later a new agricultural festival, commemorative of the completion of the harvest, was added, while the old autumn festival of the date harvest became the festival of the grape-gathering. Such changes were not peculiar to the religion of the Hebrews; they had been silently going on for centuries wherever nomadic Semites became agricultural peoples.

During this period there was no organized priesthood that was confined to one family or tribe. Micah could make one of his sons priest in his temple (Judg. 17:5); Samuel, an Ephraimite, could offer sacrifice (I Sam. 9:13, 14; 16:1-5); while David made his sons priests (II Sam. 8:18). Nevertheless there was a feeling abroad that it was better to have a Levite for a priest, so that when one appeared Micah put him in place of his son (Judg. 17:10-12). How unorganized the Levites were is shown by the fact that a young member of this class, who appears in the sequel to be a grandson of Moses, started out like any other young adventurer to seek his fortune, and accepted successive positions as they appeared attractive to him (Judg., chaps. 17, 18).

After the settlement in Canaan, while these changes were silently progressing, the religious life of the people went quietly forward. In the charming stories of the time many attractive religious scenes are graphically presented. How devout souls celebrated the festivals of animal sacrifices from year to year and poured out their hearts in private prayer is portrayed in the story of Elkanah and Hannah (I Sam., chaps. 1, 2). Hannah's aspirations move in the sphere of the objective world. In accordance with the views ingrained through long ages into the Semitic stock, her chief desire is for offspring. She regards Yahweh as the giver of children, and thinks that he can best be approached with her request when he is brought into especial nearness to his people at the feast, and his heart has been made warm by it. Nevertheless

<sup>4</sup> A similar fusion had already occurred among the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. They, too, had come from the Arabian desert where their spring festival had celebrated the birth-time of animals, and had joined to this the offering of first-fruits; cf. Barton, *Semitic Origins*, pp. 108 ff.

she approaches him in private prayer without the intervention of a priest, and affords us a glimpse of that beautiful private devotion and personal religious life which in greater or less degree must have accompanied Hebrew worship everywhere.

As devotional aids the Hebrews, like other peoples at the same stage of culture, used images of their deities. The decalogue of J, on which the covenant at Sinai was based, had not prohibited the use of such images, but only of expensive images. "Thou shalt make thee no molten gods" (Exod. 34:17) forbade them to have images of silver or gold, but left them free to use "graven images" or cheap idols carved out of wood. Such idols, called Teraphim, we find accordingly in the houses of the best of the Hebrews, the one in David's house being so large that it could be put in David's bed and passed off for David himself (I Sam. 19:13-16). This opened the way in time for more expensive images, and after a time Yahweh, like the Baals, was symbolized by little bulls made of precious metal.

That Yahweh was still emphatically regarded as a God of war, the stories of Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and David attest. So much was this the case that David, Israel's ideal warrior, was regarded as a man after Yahweh's own heart (I Sam. 13:14).

In spite of such attractive pictures of simple devotion as that presented in the story of Elkanah and Hannah, it is clear that the conceptions of Yahweh which prevailed were characteristic of the hard, crude age of which they were a part. Jephthah, for instance, bargains with Yahweh for a victory in battle, promising to offer in sacrifice the first living thing which meets him on his return home from battle. When victory was won and he was met by his only daughter, he believed Yahweh would be far more outraged by infidelity to his vow than by the horrible gift of a human sacrifice. The maiden accordingly became a victim.

A similarly crude conception of Yahweh is reflected in a story from the reign of David (II Sam. 21:1-14). A famine, caused as Palestinian famines usually are by insufficient rainfall, had occurred for three successive years, and the minds of king and people were greatly exercised to ascertain what had angered Yahweh. It was taken for granted that in some way he had been offended or he

would not withhold his rain. An oracle was obtained, which explained the cause of Yahweh's wrath. It is clear that the oracle came from the sanctuary at Gibeon, whither Solomon afterward betook himself to worship (I Kings 3:4 ff.), and that it was manipulated by the Gibeonite priesthood. The Gibeonites were an Amorite clan with whom the Hebrews at the conquest had made a treaty, promising to spare their lives (Josh. 9:3-15). In spite of this compact, Saul had endeavored to exterminate the Gibeonites, and now the oracle declared that Yahweh was angry because the innocent blood thus shed had never been avenged. Seven descendants of Saul were accordingly sought out and delivered to the Gibeonites to be put to death. These men were hanged in the springtime, just at the end of the rainy season, and their bodies were left hanging all through the long, dry summer, a ghastly testimony to the vengeance of Yahweh. When the rainy season once more came, copious showers fell, and we are told: "God was entreated for his land." The Yahweh who could be thought to punish a whole land with starvation because so gruesome a penalty for sin had not been exacted, had not yet been conceived as a merciful or loving being.

Prophets flourished at this time, but they were of a very different order from the literary prophets of a later period. In all parts of the world men have believed that people who possess such peculiarly excitable nervous organizations that they easily lose control of themselves and fall into ecstasies or trances, becoming unconscious and speaking in a broken automatic manner, are mediums of divine communication.<sup>5</sup> The ecstasy is accounted for by the belief that a god or spirit takes possession of the speaker and suppresses his humanity, making him the mouthpiece of a supernatural being. No sharp line is drawn between this condition and lunacy, for among such peoples lunacy is regarded as demoniacal or supernatural possession. The early prophets of Israel were of this class. The distinguishing mark which denoted that King Saul was a prophet was that "he stripped off his clothes and prophesied and lay down naked all that day and all that night" (I Sam. 19:24). The prophets of this period were men of such peculiar temperament

<sup>5</sup> See Davenport, *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals*, chaps. i-iii.

that they easily fell into such ecstasies (cf. I Sam. 10:10). They were men of unstable nervous organization; Saul, himself, afterward became insane. Indeed the Hebrew word for "prophecy," which means "to utter in a low voice," "to bubble over with speech," is applied both to prophet and to lunatic.

It was out of men of this sort that Israel's guilds of professional prophets were organized. They cherished the arts by which ecstatic states could be produced, and lived from the fees given them by their credulous countrymen. Such prophecy not only had a basis in natural phenomena common to others, but is clearly traceable among the Canaanites. An interesting Egyptian document, the "Report of Wenamon," written about 1100 B.C., describes a well-defined instance of this class of frenzied or ecstatic prophecy at Gebal in Phoenicia.<sup>6</sup> Such prophecy was common, therefore, to the Semites of the whole region. The prophets of this period sometimes, perhaps, relied upon other arts. Samuel is called a seer (I Sam. 9:9) and his functions seem to have been legitimately regarded as those of a man who for a small sum would inform people where to find lost property. "Seer" was the name given by the Babylonians to priests who gave forth oracles from the inspection of the livers of victims,<sup>7</sup> and it is possible that Samuel belonged to this class. It is noteworthy that he had celebrated a sacrifice the day before he gave his oracle to Saul.

One can hardly emphasize too strongly the fact that the Hebrews had become thoroughly agricultural. We have noted this in contrast to the nomadic life of the wilderness, but it is equally striking in contrast with the urban and commercial civilization of Phoenicia, Babylonia, and Egypt. In these three countries the gods had their temples or houses, decorated with many ornaments, adorned with expensive furniture and hangings, where they were served with implements of bronze and vessels of silver and gold. In striking contrast to this were the Hebrew high places, where under the open sky rude stone pillars and an altar of earth or unhewn stone constituted the simple sanctuary—a sanctuary which remained the

<sup>6</sup> See Breasted, *Ancient Records, Egypt*, IV, 280, § 570.

<sup>7</sup> See Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief in Babylonia*, pp. 158 ff., and 198 ff.; also *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XXVIII, 42-56.



orthodox type down to the composition of the E document, about 750 B.C. (Exod. 20:24-26). The ephemeral temple at Shilo (I Sam., chaps. 1-3) was an exception to the general rule among the Hebrews. Their God, like themselves, lived in the open air; he was pleased with rude, natural implements. The products of the forge and the smith were an abomination to him.

Solomon was an innovator. Seeking to make his people a commercial people and to beautify his capital after the manner of the commercial nations, he erected a splendid temple at Jerusalem, adorned it in the Phoenician fashion, equipped it with an unorthodox bronze altar, and a great variety of bronze implements. Though this temple in later ages was looked back upon as the ideal House of God, it impressed his contemporaries very differently. It was reaction against such religious innovations as well as against burdensome taxation, which enabled Jeroboam to rend the kingdom asunder. Jeroboam, when he said: "Behold thy God, O Israel, who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (I Kings 12:28), was not a religious innovator, but a religious conservative.

The innovations of Solomon affected but one shrine in the land, the shrine of Jerusalem, and that one of the youngest. Not more than forty years had passed since Jerusalem had come into the possession of the Hebrews. Nevertheless it was one of the influences which produced political revolution. It was not till a century later that the introduction of the religious practices of a commercial and artisan people led to religious revolt.

During the first three centuries of Israel's residence in Palestine, while the transformation outlined above was going on, it would have been hard to distinguish the religion of Israel from the religions of her neighbors. The elements noted in the previous paper which made for higher ethical and spiritual views were in abeyance. The seed was germinating; the time for fruitage had not yet come.

In the reign of Ahab in the ninth century a change began. Ahab had married Jezebel, a daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre, and had built for her shrines to her native god, Melkart of Tyre (I Kings 16:31 ff.). Ahab was also led in his assertion of regal power to trespass on the ancestral rights of Naboth. The Hebrews had from the beginning been free tribesmen, and, as among the Arabs, there

was a strong democratic spirit among them. They had never taken kindly to the ways of splendid monarchs. They could be loyal to a man of the people, like David, but against the ways of Solomon they had revolted. Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard caused deep popular resentment.

At this moment a new element appeared in the national life in the advent of Elijah of Tishbeh in Gilead, who represented the old nomadic ideal of Yahweh's religion. The people to the east of the Jordan had never been as fully agriculturalized as those who dwelt to the west of the river. The fertile lands merge gradually into the desert, and from the desert new reinforcements of nomads were ever coming. Among these the nomadic ideal of Yahweh still remained. All more civilized forms of life were considered abominations to him. To live in houses, or to drink wine as settled Hebrews did was considered wrong by some.<sup>8</sup> Such ideas were not indeed confined to the trans-Jordanic country, for they find ample expression in the J document, written during this century in Judah. Its author represents all progress in civilization, the tilling of the soil, the wearing of clothing, the invention of metal-working, music, etc., as the result of sin. Of this ideal, Elijah was a militant representative.<sup>9</sup>

Into the social ferment of Israel there thus came in the reign of Ahab three religious ideals. The agricultural Yahweh, who fostered the land with its wheat fields and vineyards, and was worshiped in the high places as a Baal, was one: the Yahweh or Baal of an artisan and commercial people—the Baal of Tyre, worshiped with bronze altars and luxurious ritual, like the Yahweh of Solomon's temple—was the second; the simple Yahweh of the wilderness, to whom the arts and luxuries of even a simple agricultural community were foreign—the Yahweh whose prophet and champion was Elijah—was the third.

Elijah linked the rights of the people with his presentation of his austere Yahweh and as a divinely sent messenger boldly opposed the king. By him the king was regarded as the representative of a hated foreign cult—a cult of rich and commercial Tyre—a cult

<sup>8</sup> Cf. II Kings 10:15 and Jer., chap. 35.

<sup>9</sup> See Budde, *Religion of Israel to the Exile*, chap. iv; and Barton, *Semitic Origins*, pp. 300 ff.

impure with manufactured implements and ceremonies which in idle luxury were made to pander to basest lust. Thus began that social and religious ferment, which went on for centuries, awakening gradually the Hebrew conscience. It called into existence the great Hebrew prophets, and ultimately lifted the Hebrew religion to the highest plane attained by any pre-Christian faith.

After the first manifestation of this new spirit in the person of Elijah there came a time of apparent retrogression. Elisha was by no means the spiritual equal of his great predecessor. He was the leader of the guild of ecstatic prophets, and once when an oracle was required of him, employed artificial means to produce the prophetic ecstasy in himself (II Kings 3:15). Elisha anointed Jehu to be king and encouraged him in the name of Yahweh to undertake a reform. Jehu's treacherous methods and bloody massacre of the devotees of Baal (II Kings 10:18-28) revealed anything but the dominance of an ethical spirit. In this bloody work he was aided by the Rechabites, the living exponents of the nomadic ideal. Their religion was not more ethical than that of the bloody king.

In spite, however, of barbarities perpetrated in Yahweh's name the century between Elijah and the E document was not without fruit. Spiritual awakening and ethical advance generally occur in times of social pressure, and the fruitage of the movement begun by Elijah is apparent in the moral decalogue of the E document. In this document these ethical commands stand before even the agricultural laws, and are thus given special prominence. Three of them are in substance identical with commands of the decalogue of J, but the ritual features of that decalogue were relegated to a place among the laws at the end of the Book of the Covenant. These ten commands, as then set forth, were simple and brief. While negative—declaring simply what must not be done—they marked out for all time the ethical foundations of Yahweh's religion, and prepared the way for the work of the great prophets who were to follow. Stripped of later editorial additions, they are:

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This command goes a step farther than the decalogue of J and prohibits even cheap idols.

3. Thou shalt not take the name of Yahweh in vain (i.e., thou shalt not swear to a lie).
4. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.
5. Honor thy father and thy mother.
6. Thou shalt do no murder.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.



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